

Increasing Agronomic Skills for Women Farmers and Landowners

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Introduction

According to the 2012 Ag Census, there are 32,167 women operators in Iowa, representing 9,102,738 acres. Of that group, 7,108 are listed as principal operators, representing 868,909 acres. Although Iowa State University does not discriminate in agronomic training offered, some studies show women are more comfortable attending workshops designed for female attendance only.

This specific educational effort occurred as a result of polling women in two Annie's Project cohorts, a women's grain marketing group, organized by ISU Extension and Outreach; and a local Women, Land, and Legacy cohort about their need for agronomic training. Increasing agronomic skills of women provides the opportunity for better decision-making, increased awareness of field conditions, a better understanding of inputs for crop production, and increased confidence in communication with spouse, farming partner, ag retailer, or tenant.

Materials and Methods

In response to the interest indicated by the women in the groups mentioned above, as well as personal communication with other women farmers and ag retailers, the series "Agronomy in the Field" was initiated in April 2015. This group met bi-monthly throughout the growing season starting April 28. Each session was designed to be spent in the field learning about growing conditions, growth stages, weed, disease and insect identification, scouting techniques, treatment thresholds,

cover crops, tillage practices, and soil health. Nine sessions were held at the Northern Iowa Research and Demonstration Farm. Thirty-one women expressed interest in this type of session and received email invitations to each session. On average, 10 women attended each session, and 8 of those 10 women were regular attendees at all sessions.

Each session started with introduction of the farm staff and an update of current activities and research being conducted at the farm. The field sessions were designed to be "hands-on." Farm staff assigned a corn and soybean field where participants were allowed to dig plants, conduct stand counts, and scout for insects and diseases. Weed identification was done in the weed garden as well as collecting specimens throughout the farm. The cover crop plots and long-term tillage trials also were used to support sessions.

In addition to the the hands-on sessions in the field, all participants, whether they attended or not, received an email "recap" of the topics discussed in the field, supporting photos, current conditions, and electronic access to publications that were distributed as supporting teaching materials and reference guides.

Results and Discussion

An evaluation of participants was conducted in the fall of 2015. As a result of the evaluation, 66 percent of respondents reported their knowledge improved to "very knowledgeable" in terms of corn planting conditions, planting depth, growth, and development. Almost 80 percent reported their knowledge improve to "very knowledgeable" for corn replant decisions and soybean growth and development. As a result of the session on

soybean aphid scouting and treatment, 75 percent indicated they felt very knowledgeable and several women responded they felt they could make treatment decisions on their own without input from their ag retailer. Even women who could not attend reported the email recaps and accompanying links to resources were very valuable to their decision-making process. Several women also reported these sessions increased their confidence in making agronomic decisions and several others reported they felt empowered to have better conversations with their spouse, farming partner, ag retailer, or tenant.

Having access to the research and demonstration farm with a multitude of conditions, trials, and daily work being done was extremely valuable to this effort.

Participants were exposed to more research trials and varying conditions than would be expected on an individual's farm.

Due to the success of the hands-on sessions at the research and demonstration farm, the group decided to continue to meet in a classroom type situation throughout the winter and continue with topics such as soil fertility and herbicide programs.

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Figure 1. Agronomy in the Field participants discussing sudden death syndrome in soybean.